

[A].

00:00

Interviewer: My name is Alicia Mittelman, I'm the Curator of Education at the Estes Park Museum. Today is February 18, 2014 and we are in Kelly Cordes' home. We are going to interview him for the Estes Valley Mountaineering Oral History Project which is a joint project between the Estes Park Museum and the Estes Valley Library. We are going to talk to Kelly about alpinism, his writing and his training in Estes Park. [This interview is also available in video format, filmed by Brian Brown. The interview was transcribed by Tom Williams with assistance from Alicia Mittelman.]

What is your full name?

Kelly Cordes: You want my middle name too?

Interviewer: Please.

Kelly Cordes: Ok, Kelly Reed Cordes.

Interviewer: Ok, now it's down on the record. Kelly, where were you born?

Kelly Cordes: I was born in Pullman, Washington in 1968.

Interviewer: I understand you began climbing in Montana. When did you come to Estes Park?

Kelly Cordes: I think I moved here, summer of 2000 to start working at the Colorado Mountain School. Had like a summer job guiding and was living in the guide shack and just kind of stayed, as with like a lot of people who come here I think.

Interviewer: How did you find out about guiding at CMS?

Kelly Cordes: I don't really remember exactly how it happened. I think one day somehow or another John Bicknell who owns CMS, maybe we had a connection or mutual friend of something and he had invited me to go climbing with him one day. We went climbing and I guess little did I know it was a little bit of an informal try out because afterward I think he offered me a summer job. That was that and then I moved into the shack and didn't leave for a year. Didn't leave Estes Park for, that was like 15 years ago.

Interviewer: Where did you take your clients climbing?

Kelly Cordes: Mostly Lumpy Ridge it seems. We climbed in the Park sometimes which is a mixed bag, it's always great to get up in the Park but it kind of depends upon the strength of the client. I remember like being so bitter one time when I was about to die on the Keyhole Route with a client. It's like lightening is crashing down like 20 feet away from us. The client had just completely hit the wall. Completely hit the wall, I mean the dude knew how serious it was, he just was so worked, he

could not move any faster. Like the storm clouds are rolling in and we got to get down. That storm coming fast. I remember I had just come back from my best yet Alaska trip and I was pissed. I was just bitter, I'm like, "I've just had the best trip of my life and this is how I'm going to die. We are going to get struck by lightning on the Keyhole Route." [laughter] But I didn't really die, I'm still here.

Interviewer: How did you coach him through it?

Kelly Cordes: "Come on dude, we got to go. Get your ass up, come on, we got to go." He's like, "I know, I know." We just eventually made it down. It was like a 24 hour day or something. It's like oh, it was grim.

Interviewer: What happens at the end when you get back to the trail head and you part ways?

Kelly Cordes: You hope that he gives you a big tip. Actually I remember that one, he did, yeah. So that softened the blow a little bit. I remember being ornery, now I think that was kind of the beginning of the end for my guiding career. Cause it was like, I was like a fair weather guide. If the client's good and the weather's good and I'm having a good time, like it's great. But if not I'd get real syndical and bitter. I was never mean to anybody about it but then like afterward in like the guide meeting debrief then I'd become a jerk about it. Then the head guide people, whoever the guide was would be pissed at me and I'm pissed at him. Yeah, maybe I needed an attitude adjustment. So I quit guiding.

04:19

Interviewer: Did you get to climb a lot with some of the other guides on your own time or did you find that there wasn't really that much time for that climbing?

Kelly Cordes: Yeah, that was the thing about guiding for me, was or at least guiding full time like that. I mean guiding on occasion with like selected good clients, I mean that's great. But like full time guiding, just for me any way, it just kind of drained my energy to go climbing on my own. So I always admired those guides who maintained that sort of energy because I didn't really have it. Like on my days off I'd just want to like sleep in, rest, do laundry, whatever. The thing about guiding is that it's, there's this misnomer when you are a young climber and you haven't guided before. Like, "Ah, sweet, it's like getting paid to go climbing." No it isn't, it's like getting poorly paid for some really dangerous babysitting. They say that the rules of guiding is that, "The clients are always trying to kill you, the clients are always trying to kill themselves, and the clients are always trying to kill the other clients." You have to try to manage all of that. You get really good at running up super easy routes that aren't really challenging for you usually. But again, sometimes you get some really good clients who are really dialed. I always liked it when the clients were into the process and they were really interested in learning as they went. Like those people I was really into that, like I would show them things and they would learn, it was really cool for me to see their progress. The one's I didn't like were the people who just wanted you to drag them up something so they could get back to the office and brag that they had climbed

Longs Peak or whatever. Like I didn't really have any use for that sort of mentality towards the mountains and I still don't.

Interviewer: Did you ever let them lead some climbs?

Kelly Cordes: No, at least if I did I wasn't supposed to and as such I would have blocked it out of my memory. Generally you're not supposed to let the clients lead cause it's too dangerous. So instead, with a good client and again I feel like I need to keep throwing out these disclaimers because sometimes you get some clients who are really rad and they're pretty psyched on going climbing with them. You see that on the schedule or something that you got to sign to go climbing this day and then you see the client name and you're like, "Awe, I remember that guy or that girl, like yeah, yeah we went climbing together last summer. Awesome, I'm psyched for that one." For the most part, you don't really trust them to belay you properly if you fall. And so essentially it's best to think of it as like that you are soloing more or less. You are doing easy enough routes where you are comfortable with it but you don't really want to like count on someone who is basically doesn't know how to climb, which is why they hired you. You don't really want to trust them completely with the safety systems. Almost by definition they might not know exactly what they are doing, which is kind of why they are hiring you, to show them this cool experience. But that comes with some tradeoffs, like safety and stuff like that. Some people manage it; some people are really good at it and really into it and make a career out of it. I don't know, I think I didn't have the patience and I think I was too selfish about my climbing which I make no apologies for. I wanted to go climbing for myself, that's what I love to do.

Interviewer: So what came next after guiding?

Kelly Cordes: I had dabbled in writing just a little bit and I kind of thought, "Like awe, as a lot of people who don't know any better yet think. It's like, "Awe, making a living writing, that sounds great." So I thought that would be ok and if I kept my expenses low that maybe I could figure out a way to make it work. I was living in the guide shack at CMS and it was like the winter season so there wasn't much guiding work. I got offered just through just kind of serendipitous circumstances, I got invited to apply for this position with the American Alpine Journal as one of their, as an editorial assistant. It was all based on an article; let's see I had interviewed the editor of the AAJ, Christian Beckwith, who actually spent a year living in Estes before he moved to Jackson, Wyoming. I had interviewed him for an article that I was trying to write that never got published, but Christian thought that my, it was about alpinism and hype and commercialism and all those interactions. Christian thought that my questions were good and my topic was interesting and he knew at that point that I had some experience with alpine climbing and some knowledge about it. They had this super part time position open up to help him gather information and he basically asked me to apply. I like, "This is a great opportunity." So I remember like, living in this shack and no heat, like holes in the walls and rats running around the place. Sixty-five dollars a month, so this is a real bargain and I had this old computer that I'd gotten somewhere. We didn't have internet or anything but I would type things up, put

them on a thumb drive, go down to the library and e-mail off my response or my application as it turned out to be, it wasn't anything formal. Yeah, I got hired and I was just like so psyched. I worked at the AAJ for 12 years; I ended up being the Senior Editor of the American Alpine Journal. It was always a part time, part year editorial job and so I always had to supplement it with other work like free-lance writing is what I started to do to substitute it. Nowadays I no longer work at the AAJ, 12 years is a long time to do any single job.

11:09

I've kind of moved on to some other things. I don't know if it was the best idea in the world or not [laughing]. But trying to make a living completely based on my writing which is really difficult to do and I'm not so sure if it's working out. There's a liquor store right across the street from my house and when I was working on the manuscript for my first book, which the publisher has it right now and it's slated for publication in the fall. It's about Cerro Torre, this peak down in Patagonia with a crazy history. One day I was having a particularly terrible day of writing, sitting here in my house, my little home office as you can see. And if you look on top of my computer monitor there's a photo there, that's a photo of the front door at the liquor store. They have a "help wanted" sign there. I remember like having this just terrible day of writing and just stuck inside my own head, and "It's terrible and like I'm the worst writer in the world, it's terrible, it sucks." I'm like, "Screw this I'm going to the liquor store." I walked over there and I'm just like, before I opened the door I saw that sign that said, "help wanted", I sat there for a while thinking about it, "Like yeah, that actually sounds really good." I think at the time when I took the photo I was a little bit perplexed, I thought I sounded really good cause figured maybe I'd just stand there and sell booze and wouldn't have to think about much, kind of sounds alright. But then I took the picture and taped it to my computer screen to remind me not to screw up this project because I thought, "If I do a good job of it and there is no guarantees, that if I do a good job of it maybe I can continue to make a living writing. Maybe not, no guarantees for sure, but if I screw it up that's what I'm going to be doing." Then I've come back around to thinking that that actually might be what I want to be doing, it'd be so much simpler.

Interviewer: What do you like about writing about climbing or editing pieces that have to do with climbing all around the world?

Kelly Cordes: Climbing is my passion in life, I absolutely love it and it's formed an enormous part of who I am. It's formed the strongest memories of my life over the last 20 years since I started climbing. I mean it's kind of what I know. It really is, for better or worse, it's kind of the defining force in my life. So it seems it's a bit of a natural fit to try to write about those experiences and to be involved in that world editorially sometimes. Although people talk about like making your passion become your work and there's some double edged sword involved there as well. Sometimes it maybe would be nicer to not be thinking about stories and how I'm going to write this, how am I going to frame that. With some of my, well like I have some sponsors and I do a lot of work with Patagonia. That's great and

everything for sure and I'm really grateful for it, but there's also a down side to having your climbing be public and going out with photographers and things like that. It's worked out well for me and I'm grateful for the opportunities but at the same time you are always kind of having to think about how this is coming off, how it's looking, how, god am I really climbing for myself? Yeah, I am and I absolutely love it and I don't think any outside forces could make me go do the things that I do. When I climb in the mountains it's always just me and a buddy, I have never gone into the mountains with like a film crew or anything like that. Sometimes you have to be on display, that can be a bummer sometimes.

15:38

Interviewer: Actually that touches upon a question I had about what it's like being a sponsored climber and to what extent does it affect the decisions you make while you're climbing?

Kelly Cordes: I think that's a really important question and topic. So the cliché answer is that, "Oh no, nothing affects the decisions I make." I think we all want that to be true but I don't really think that's completely honest.

Interviewer: Especially with Patagonia and the title that you are given as an "Ambassador" for the company. What's that like?

Kelly Cordes: That's like kind of fancy. It's a little bit interesting, like on the one hand for sure, on the big hand I'm totally grateful for it and I've adapted to it just fine and I think I'm a low level enough climber within the scheme of sponsored climbers. I'm not as good a climber as Tommy [Caldwell] or Josh [Wharton] or someone like that. For me there are different rules and like with Patagonia I actually mostly earn my keep through being really involved with product development and testing. I'm kind of like the testing donkey, like when they have like prototypes or they dream up some idea for this new fabric and we need some idiot to go out and like really nasty weather and tell us if this thing works or not. I'm the idiot they, yeah, the FedEx package shows up at my door. So I do an awful lot of that with product development and feedback. But then also sometimes they'll want your testimony about a piece that you've worked on, a piece of clothing or a product or whatever. Patagonia is really good about not making me talk a bunch of bull shit about something that I don't like. Like if they send out a thing saying, "Hey, we need someone to talk about such and such." I can and I have been like, "I don't really use that piece that much, it's not my favorite." But then if there's something that I like or that I had a hand in developing then they'll be things like, "Ok, we want to send a film crew out and have you climb and do an interview and this and that." That's all cool but it's work, I mean it is work.

Interviewer: So what's an example of a piece of gear that you tested and then gave feedback towards? Walk me through something like that.

Kelly Cordes: Yeah, for sure. Well for example they did a piece a couple of years ago on this thing they called the "Piton Hybrid Hoodie". It's got like this hybrid fabric pattern

on it and I was involved quite a bit to like where we wanted to put some of the more wind resistance and weather resistant pieces which has a tradeoff of not being as breathable verses the areas where we want it to be more stretchy and more breathable. What sorts of features, how do we want the hood to fit, do we want little thumb loops on it or not? How many pockets, this and that. These are things that like, I mean it's not rocket science, but they want it to be a real deal for serious users. If you ask around, everybody has an opinion as to how it should be. "Oh there should be more of this or should be less that." And with a piece like that they're wanting it to be dialed for climbers. So I was one of the people involved in testing various iterations of it. God, there's a thing called a M-10 jacket

19:35 [End of Part A.]

[B].

00:00

that I did a bunch of work on a thing called Knife Blade jacket and pants that I tested the fabric a lot on that which involves getting out in the Park in bad conditions and using it and seeing how it goes. Then like with that piece that I was giving the example of, the Piton Hybrid thing, so I was involved a lot with that. Then when it came out they knew that I was involved in that a lot and so they had a film crew from Patagonia come out and we went out to Lumpy and I climbed in it and then I have to be the kind of talking head afterward. "Tell us about the features on the bla, bla, bla." You feel a little bit like a poser but at the same time that particular piece was one that I liked. I had input on it so I was ok with talking about it. It's a little bit cheesy in a way right, it's commercial work. And then when you are out there climbing, when you are climbing for the camera it's like, I mean remember I was saying how guiding is not like going climbing with your buddies? Same with climbing in front of the camera, it's a day of work. It's good work, I like it but it's not like just a day going climbing. You put the rope up there for the camera man, camera guy who is usually a buddy or whose a good climber, but he's a professional photographer also or videographer. He's up there, he's going, "Ok now can you reverse that move and come down and like look this way a little bit, look that way. Alright, now we need you to re-climb that pitch again." Like, "Oh, man, my fingers are kind of getting sore." "Would you mind doing that pitch one more time, at least just the first half of it?" "Ok, yeah, sure." It's a dog and pony show for sure.

Interviewer: So with the product testing, I imagine you go to places in the Park where you experience a lot of bad weather. That's kind of a good segway to talking about something you called as "the chase". Describe it to me, what is the chase?

Kelly Cordes: Yeah, the chase is kind of what I call this chase, this quest to find ice climbs in the Park, especially the rarely forming ice climbs. I mean you have a few things; you have Hidden Falls, Loch Vale Gorge. They form reliably every year, they get a little bit old after a while if you've climbed there a bazillion times. But the Park

has all these phenomenal ice climbs but they form very rarely, the best ones and they require kind of a weird like voodoo mix of conditions for them to form. Everyone among the smaller handful of people who are into this, they're always trying to figure out when certain climbs will form. Sometimes they're established climbs that they are already there that someone has climbed before, maybe only once or twice in the last decade and you saw photos of it or something. You are like, "Oh, that looks amazing!" You're always out there kind of chasing it to see if it's there or not. Studying weather forecasts, talking with your buddies, sometimes your friends will be lying to you though. Like, "Alright dude, I know you went up in the Longs Peak cirque yesterday. Hey, how was it? Was such in such in, was there ice in there?" "Naw, un una." "He's lying, I know he's lying." So you go through this whole psychological thing of like, and then the next thing you know you are trying to frame it in a different way. "Oh yeah, I heard you were kind of out yesterday." Uh huh, yeah." "Where did you go?" "Oh cool." "Yeah, I did really see much ice where I went; I guess you probably didn't either, huh?" It's like a bad spy movie, the dialog between you and your friends. Then they'll tell you something and you're not sure if you believe them or not. So ultimately the best thing to do is to go chase it yourself. You trail on in, at least in the fall, cause yeah, October and first half of November are usually the best months, at least in the fall. Then you get the same thing happening in the spring, and so you'll run or maybe ski tour or hike like in the spring when there's snow. With binoculars you're lookin and studyin, sometimes you got to go literally go up to the base to see if it's good enough to climb. Then it's like, you're thinking about, "Aw man, I spent five hours today, like going in and out doing this and looks like there's enough ice on it to climb." You go back, you look at the weather forecast, like, "Oh, it's going to get cold tonight but then the following day it's going to get warm. Ah man, I guess I have to suck it up tomorrow. My legs are kind of tired and I had this work I was supposed to do, so I'm going to send this e-mail off like making up some stories as to why I'm not going to meet tomorrow's deadline." Start calling buddies up to see who can go. Then with this whole chase scenario, when you call your buddies up to see if they can go you kind of don't want to reveal your card. Because if you saw a climb that's just there and it might only be there for a day or two, you don't want other people on it. So you don't want the word to get out, right? You want to be the one who gets to climb it. So you're like, "Hey, doing anything tomorrow?" "I was thinking of going rock climbing." "What are you doing?" "Awe, I was thinkin about going to the Park, maybe want to go into the Park instead?" "Why, what did you see?" "Nothin, but you should really go into the Park with me." "Alright dude I'm going to tell you but if you don't go with me you can't tell anybody else, alright?" Then you make your plans and go up and scare yourself out of your mind cause usually these particularly ephemeral climbs, ice by nature is ephemeral, but these really fleeting things that you're chasing after that sometimes form once a decade. It's like almost by definition they therefore don't really form very big and fat with the ice. So, they are often times kind of sketchy, kind of scary. So it's like this ongoing mental game and constant assessment as you're climbing. "Am I keeping this reasonable enough, am I keeping this safe enough?" If the answer's no, "Do I

care, am I willing to push it out there a little farther? Confident enough that I'm not going to fall so it's not going to matter?" It's a challenging psychological game and I like that. I think it's pretty neat.

07:01

Interviewer: Can you tell me about how the route Crazy Train came to be and everything you remember of that day?

Kelly Cordes: Yeah, for sure. That one was really cool because it was, I had just moved to Estes Park a few months earlier, in the summer of 2000 and I was guiding. And then I had always heard about this famous route up there in the Longs Peak cirque called "Smear of Fear". I had seen pictures of it, old pictures of the first ascent with like Malcom Daley, Jeff Lowe and Duncan Ferguson. They had become heroes of mine and like I'd heard these stories and seen these old pictures, a really thin mixed climb. It had become kind of legendary and as a climber in Montana I would see these pictures of it and I'd always thought, "Like awe man, someday I'd love to be able to climb that. Oh my god. I came down, yeah I'd just moved here and I was living in the shack and it was October. I somehow remember the date, it was October 10th. So it's like early, like rationally we should have been rock climbing at Lumpy that day or something and you could have. You always think that too when you are up there and you're like scared out of your mind and maybe the winds kicked up or maybe there's water coming down and you're cold. You're like, "We're such idiots." You just look across the valley and it's sunny and nice and warm over there. All your buddies are out rock climbing and you're up there scaring yourself out of your mind on something. So anyway, it was October 10th and Topher Donahue, like legendary dude, you know he used to climb all kinds of amazing stuff around here. He was wanting to go climbing with me, like I'm the new guy in town. So I was kind of like grateful, like "Wow, that's pretty cool, this guy's willing to go climbing with me." We went up to the Smear of Fear to have a look and it was thin but it was in well enough to climb. I was like, "Wow, we just climbed the Smear of Fear, I've been dreaming of this route forever." It was kind of interesting because it went; I remember it going a lot easier than I thought it was going to be. It doesn't always work out that way so when it does you should be grateful for it. I remember kind of thinking, "Like wow, it's interesting." I had built this climb up in my head so much and it wasn't that it was in particularly big fat fit conditions, I mean it was in pretty scrappy conditions. I thought that felt fairly reasonable to me, maybe I was just having a good day or whatever. It was kind of interesting cause I had built it up in my head to be so, so like overwhelming, something that I didn't know if I could ever do. It's interesting to think about how your mind can hold you back sometimes. So yeah, it went quickly enough and there was plenty of daylight left and over to the right was this route called, well it wasn't a route yet, it was this smear of ice. People had seen it partially come in and come close to the ground in years past. Ice does weird things sometimes it can be totally dry and nothing happens, other years they'll be some ice coming down and then this particular year it looked like it might be coming down far enough after all these years of people looking at this

line. We went over and I think I was like exuberant from climbing the Smear of Fear and I like, Topher is a much better climber than I am. But I somehow had like convinced him to let me take the lead and try it. Yeah, it was real thin and no protection for the first, I don't know how long. You know, it's a steep slab, right? There's no cracks on the side and that's the whole thing about that climb needing to come down far enough, cause you need enough ice to get on it to be able to climb it. But it was real thin at the bottom and so you gotta be kind of delicate and judge every move as you go because without protection, if the ice peels off you are going to hit the ground and that can obviously be disastrous. So it requires a great deal of mind control as well as physical execution. I think that's a phenomenal combination of things that climbing requires. Including the mastery of yourself and your own fear. I don't believe any climber who says they don't get scared. Basically no serious climber, no real climber says that. I mean that's the crap that you see in like Hollywood movies or something. Every climber is afraid at times. You know it's how you deal with the fear and that psychological control is an incredibly empowering thing to work on. A lot of times you end up retreating, you have to be smart about it. On that particular day I felt good enough to continue and then it was like 180' of absolutely brilliant, very very thin technical ice climbing. We called the route, "Crazy Train" and then in subsequent weeks it formed a little fatter and it became a little bit of a Front Range classic for that season. And I'm quite certain that that's the only season that it's ever formed well enough for somebody to climb. Maybe, I think that was the only season, I'm not sure. Might have gotten some assents one other year subsequently, but I think that's the only year. It almost formed this year, but from what I understand nobody got on it. Someone might have, I just might not know about it. It looked like it wanted to come down but wasn't quite good enough. So yeah, that's like a perfect example of the chase, although I didn't know enough to be chasing anything at that point. That was kind of just dumb luck.

13:08

Interviewer: What did you and Topher talk about after he followed you up and you had each had a chance at climbing it?

Kelly Cordes: I don't really remember what we talked about anything. I think I remember him thinking that I should have placed more protection. Yeah a lot of times I probably ran it out more than I should. But it's also kind of hard when the ice is really thin and it's difficult to protect. But we had a great day and it was, yeah we had a terrific day together and it was an honor for me to get to go climbing with him and get to do a new route in like this fabled like Longs Peak cirque after climbing the Smear of Fear which I had heard about for so many years. As a young climber in Montana had thought, "Awe, maybe someday I'll be good enough to climb that route. Yeah, so it was a little bit of an interesting example in a way of like kind of the mind and how sometimes, you know stories can really inspire us, right? Like I was super inspired to always want to try the Smear of Fear from just hearing stories, reading magazine articles, seeing pictures. This was back before the internet when I was in Montana and learning about this stuff. Maybe the tubes and

stuff of the internet had just been invented, but if so I didn't have a computer or know how to use them. So I had been really inspired by these stories too. Sometimes the stories can become built up so much that they take on this like almost mythological status to where it can then, on the one hand it can inspire you but it can also hold you back a little bit. And maybe that's just my own fault. Sometimes you think that "Awe this has become like such an incredible thing, I'll never be good enough to do that." It turns out I was plenty good enough to do it. I just wasn't sure if I was or not. That can go the other way too and you can be too cocky and get yourself into trouble which I've done a lot of, so it goes both ways.

15:26

Interviewer: Who had Black Sabbath stuck in their head?

Kelly Cordes: Yeah, I think it was both of us cause yeah, that's the great Black Sabbath song "Crazy Train" cause I think I remember us both like agreeing like, "Yeah, that'd be a good one." I don't know what, it's kind of funny, when I climb a lot of times I just have songs playing in my head. They're different songs at different times. It's kind of cool because like sometimes then you'll hear that song on the radio or wherever and it just like takes you back to that place. There's like a Bob Dillon song that I had playing through my head when Scotty D. and I were doing a new route in Alaska one year. Every time I hear that song it kind of takes you back to that trip and those times which were fantastic memories. It's kind of neat.

Interviewer: Was Scott DeCaprio?

Kelly Cordes: DeCaprio, yeah.

Interviewer: DeCaprio, excuse me. He's also a local climber and as is Topher [Donahue] who was raised in the area. Do you think Estes Park has something special about it that it is a breeding ground for modern alpinists?

Kelly Cordes: In a way it probably is or it could be, I don't know. Estes Park as like a almost breeding ground for modern alpinists. I mean, maybe. Sounds a little dramatic for my liking [chuckles]. I mean the terrain is certainly conducive to it and that's why we all live here. Well, Topher was born in this area and I guess Tommy [Caldwell] too. I moved here, Scotty D. moved here, we were all like homeless at the time just like drifter climbing bums. Scotty was living out of his car; I was living in the guide shack. I moved to a different shack at the other end of town, a little thing called the "Chicken Coop." It was seven by eleven square feet and I rented that for three years after my year in the shack. So I mean we were just, I don't know how many years Scotty was living in his car before he got a place. There's just a lot of us just come here because of the climbing. You have phenomenal rock climbing, rope drop climbing, bouldering, ice climbing if you can hit it just right. But part of the allure if you are around here is the chase, I mean we don't have the consistent ice, good quality ice that a place like Ouray at the other end of the state has. It's a lot harder to sometimes to find the ice around here but it sometimes feels rewarding. So much great rock climbing nearby and of

course the Park and the Diamond and Chief's Head, I mean countless rock climbs. So you have a little bit of altitude there which isn't necessarily a bad thing for when you, if you're heading off on the trips around the world, you already have a little bit of a jump step on the acclimatization process. Yeah, the terrain's what draws us all here. Frankly, the town doesn't, I mean a bunch of fudge shops isn't the reason. We have a great like local community of people who live here but, edit this out if you want, but I mean frankly it's a, this is a seasonal tourist town but with a small local community. And the small local community of climbers is really a pretty strong little community. I mean that's why Josh Wharton moved here, it's why a bunch, I mean it's why all of us have ended up here. In the Park in winter, like, "Hoh" and you guys know what it's like up there, like the wind and the snow and the blow. I don't get out climbing in the Park in winter that much anymore cause I'm just a little too soft for it at this point. For like

19:36 [End of Part B.]

[C].

00:00

real deal alpine training, going up and scratching around on some of the routes in the Park in the winter, you deal with all kinds of terrible conditions, like it's full on like big mountain prep.

Interviewer: You're, Kelly, fairly well known for a lot of the climbs you've done around the world in some of the great mountain ranges. To what extent was climbing and training locally important to you or influenced your climbing around the world?

Kelly Cordes: They are inextricable really. I don't want to say that someone can't go and do new routes in the big ranges around the world if they don't live in a place like this because there's plenty of examples of people who do and they're are motivated enough to do it. Maybe they train in their local area and take trips to climbing areas. For me and especially always living in a low budget life style and trying to scrap together a living so I could climb. Climbing is taking the priority and I want to be able to have climbing right at my fingertips if I want. So having that here is greatly improved my skill level. I mean it's like anything, there's no short cut to getting good or in my case at least just decent. There's a lot of climbers who are so much better than me but within the sphere of own development, my climbing skills, particularly my rock climbing skills just got so much better from living here because I can literally go climbing like almost every day.

Interviewer: So what's it like when you commit to an international trip? You've booked your tickets to Pakistan or to Patagonia, tell me in detail what is your training like?

Kelly Cordes: My training before a big trip really involves a lot of mileage on local climbs. So at Lumpy for example there's all these great granite domes right, and so what I would do a lot of is going around and often times by myself, sometimes with a partner, just climbing tons and tons of pitches. Maybe with a rope on, we climb 20 or 30 pitches of difficult climbing, at least for us. Do them as quickly as we can

and then without a rope, I don't know, 30 or 40 pitches sometimes of just running from one formation to the next. Soloing, down climbing the back side, run over to the next formation, solo it, down climb, go to the next. It's not the safest thing in the world, climbing without a rope; I guess any idiot can see that.

Interviewer: So it's specifically you would run to the furthest western dome, Sundance, which is also the biggest.

Kelly Cordes: Sometimes.

03:26

Interviewer: And you would climb it, do the decent by running down?

Kelly Cordes: Yeah, well that's what I used to do; I have a hard time running these days with my leg. I wouldn't always do the same thing. I spent a lot of time in the Book area cause it's so loaded with routes. Like one day for sure I just wanted to climb, start at Sundance and end at Twin Owls. Yeah, start at Sundance and I don't remember that day, whenever I'd go soloing at Sundance I'd either do Kor's Flake, that was the first time I was out there actually I remember. Yeah, first time I ever climbed anything at Sundance I soloed Kor's Flake. But most of the time I think when I went out there I would climb on Grapevine, it's called. I always remember, "god some of the things I did weren't always that smart." There's a spot like I don't know if you ever in the guidebook, how many pitches up, maybe five or six pitches. But there's this ledge and there's a spot where the normal route kinda goes down and around left just a little bit on really easy terrain, 5.2 or something or 5.5 or something. It's the normal way to go but there's a boulder problem right off that ledge that's just like, it's like thin techie slab climbing. I think they call it 5.9+. So not terribly hard, gosh the way people are climbing these days it's no big deal. Always, I think every time I've been up there I've told myself, "Naw you should go do the other." The other way is more secure, not just that it is easier but it's more secure climbing. I mean thin kind of slab climbing. I think every time I've been there I've done the boulder problem little thing. I remember, god I'm such an idiot sometimes. Like I remember the first time I was up there thinking, "Well there's a ledge here, if I blow it I can maybe stick the landing." Which there's no way, it's just like that was some of the mindset I was in at the time, I guess. I had a phase where I was really into soloing a lot. I guess I didn't care all that much, not in a bad way, I was so in love with climbing that it didn't really matter. Which is kind of a, a lot of people might think, "Oh that's so irresponsible." But it's kind of a beautiful place to be in if you are so devoted to something and you are so in love with it at the time. Yeah, it would be different if you had children or someone relying on you. I was a single dude living in the shack, absolutely completely in love with climbing like nothing else. So that's what mattered to me. Back to I guess your original question about training and linkups and stuff. Yeah, run out to Sundance, Camelback and rock shoes on my pack and run out as hard as I can, get my heart rate up through the roof and then catch my breath, change into my climbing shoes. Climb Sundance, descend the other side, run, slash hike across the hill side over to, what would it be, probably

the Pear. I mean I'd skip some of the more obscure formations. I think you go the Pear and then the Book End, yeah, Pear then I think Book End and you got Book Mark, Left Book, Right Book then you got Bat Man, Pinnacle, Bat Man Rock, Rock One, the mighty Rock One and then Twin Owls. I might have forgotten something in between there. Yeah, things like that and by the time you're done I mean you've gotten an incredible aerobic workout in from all the trail running and the consistent movement of climbing, your heart rate doesn't drop that much when, I mean it does for sure, if the stuff that I used to solo was easy enough for me, most of it's in the 5.6 to 5.8 range to where I could really get a rhythm going and keep moving. I think that's pretty applicable to alpine climbing. Cause a lot of times the alpine climbing, at least say at places like Alaska and a lot of places. I mean it depends upon the objectives you're doing but for me, we were climbing a lot of big long routes that maybe didn't have a whole lot of super hard terrain in the way that say, climbing a hard sport climbing route is. But you had to cover a lot of mountainous terrain in a relatively short period of time before bad weather moves in or whatever. So it was absolutely crucial to be able to cover moderate terrain quickly. So by doing these solo linkup days I learned or further developed the ability to move, to cover technical terrain quickly which is absolutely essential to alpine climbing. Then of course you can do that up in the Park too, we do linkups, I'd usually do those roped in the Park. My good friend Johnny Copp one day, I remember we were going up to the Sky Pond Cirque and I was like, "Awe, we should climb the Saber or something." And he's like, "Why don't we do all three of them?" So we did the Foil, the Saber, and the Petit, which was no big deal but Johnny was like, "Yeah, why don't we do all three of them?"

09:28

Interviewer: In a day?

Kelly Cordes: Yeah, yeah. Then we got thinking along the lines of like linking up terrain, I mean it's only limited by your imagination and you can do it at any ability level. I mean you really can. A beginning climber might, if they are looking to build up a lot of mileage and getting comfortable moving over terrain, which is just again so important. Linkup Rock One in the Sky Route on Twin Owls, I mean why not? Why do just one of them? If you can move quickly enough, some people might say, "Why are you in such a hurry?" To me I don't think of it as being in a hurry, I mean the greatest joy I've probably ever known is moving in the mountains, covering terrain, covering technical terrain, covering terrain in the mountains, I absolutely love it. It feels so good. We started thinking about like things to linkup in the Park and one summer Johnny and I, it was after, so my friend Brent Armstrong and I had tried it and failed. And then we had called it the "Triple Lindy" cause there was this dive that Rodney Dangerfield did in that movie, "Back to School". These were the three, I guess, three biggest rock faces in the Park. I don't know, you might be able to argue which of the two faces on Chief's Head is bigger, I'm not sure. We did the east face of Longs, so we climbed like the Lower East Face then the Diamond, continued above Table Ledge and then finished by scrambling up to the summit by way of Upper Kiener's. Descended

down the Trough into the Glacier Gorge Cirque, then climbed the northwest face of Chief's Head, started on the thing called "Path of Otters" linked to that Birds of Fire, scrambled to the summit of Chief's Head. You're making up your own games right, so we made up our own rules. We decided we wanted to tag the summit on each one too. So we scrambled to the summit of Chief's Head and then we went over to the east face of Mt. Alice, dropped into that cirque, and then climbed the east face of Mt. Alice, tagged the summit. Started hiking out, by that point it was dark, we had started in the dark also. Got lost on the trail going back to Wild Basin but we, it was 22 or 23 hours or something like that. It was I think maybe, I think I marked it on the map, I think like horizontally it was something like 25 miles of just foot terrain but that doesn't count the ups and downs and several thousand feet of technical climbing. I mean that's like the sort of thing that the Park has to offer and that frankly would be like no big deal to some climbers. To me it pushed me and it was tiring and helped my development to getting used to doing big days in the mountains. We have that sort of terrain right in our back yards. I like to utilize it, it's fun.

Interviewer: Often times we hear after a climb is finished, it gets recorded and it's documented who the first ascent is, but there's really a lot of suffering that goes on, sometimes going up the mountain. Can you tell me about that?

Kelly Cordes: I think with alpine climbing, at least in my experience, there's always some kind of suffering involved. I mean it's not all "puppy dogs and rainbows" or whatever. Like, "Awe, this is great, it's fun." It's like, I mean it's fun in a way but it's kind of like, there's often times a lot of kind of well a lot of fear involved. I talked about that earlier and that. But also outright physical discomfort because you're always trying to go super lightweight so that you can move fast and also it's not fun to climb with a bunch of crap on your back. It's just too heavy so you're really trying to shave down the weight. But that also entails, that means you're not going to be that comfortable. Sometimes you're going to be cold, sometimes you didn't bring enough food, you didn't bring enough water. Gosh I mean, Josh [Wharton] and I went 48 hours without water to finish up our climb on Great Trango Tower in Pakistan just because we wanted to keep going. Basically we just wanted to go up more than we wanted to go down. It just seems worth it at the time and when you're really really eager to do something, of course some sacrifices will be involved. I think it's got to be like that with almost anything worth doing in life. Anything difficult, basically anything that ends up having this really strong lasting memory, but that you're happy about it and you're proud about, it probably required something deep from you. We don't remember the easy stuff, we don't remember walking to the mail box, who cares, so what? Sometimes the easy or not easy but even the technically difficult climbs at the Crag, those are fun and they're great days and I absolutely love them but those aren't the lasting memories. I'm glad that I have those and developing those skills and then on local things where we push hard and try to do like some of these linkups that I was talking about, the idea there is to expand your comfort zone or your discomfort zone. You kind of start to get used to changing your perception of what discomfort entails. You decide whether or not it's worth it to you. For

those very reasons a lot of people don't like alpine climbing cause it usually does entail a lot of discomfort but the rewards are almost indescribable to those of us who have kind of devoted our lives to it. They form the strongest memories of our lives.

16:11

Interviewer: You and Josh Wharton now are really good friends. But at the time that you set out to do the Great Trango Tower, you didn't know each other that well. [Kelly Cordes: Right, yeah.] I was surprised to learn that you, tell me about what that dynamic was like.

Kelly Cordes: It was kind of cool because, Josh and I have talked about this in subsequent years. It's kind of interesting because, so at the time I was living up here in Estes, I think he was a student at C.U. in Boulder or maybe he had just finished or something. We had gone climbing a little bit together; we kind of knew each other more by reputation, or by mutual friendship. We had climbed together a few times. I think that part of our success on that trip was, well basically everything was due to this drive that we had to continue. Especially after we didn't plan quite right and ran out of fuel at our second bivy and so we couldn't melt snow for water and so forth. A lot of climbing and a lot of dangerous climbing and just like run out climbing. Yeah, a lot of things. But I think that maybe the fact that we didn't know each other really well might have actually been integral to our success. I don't know, it's not formulaic, you can be sure but sometimes when you don't know your partner super well there's maybe a little bit of an edge that you both have, cause you kind of feel that you have something to prove. Josh and I have talked about that, maybe sometimes that plays a role. I'm not suggesting that you just go climb with any yahoo; we'd both had enough mutual friends and had done enough climbs to where we knew the other was solid and a good partner. We seemed to hit it off well personally which is crucial, that dynamic. The fact that we hadn't developed a long running partnership, maybe in a way helped drive us cause like I didn't want to look like a wimp in front of him. I think he was maybe the same. He was young and psyched and driven and I basically got a short guy's complex and a girl's name or something. So I don't want to look like a wimp. Whereas like with some of the people, like now days I go climbing with Josh I can be like, "Awe dude, I'm cold I don't really want to." By now he knows that sometimes I can be a wimp. I didn't want to let on to it at the time.

Interviewer: This is an incredible story that you two have of climbing the biggest rock climb in the world and dropping some of the gear along the way. Like you mentioned running out of water, so that's an interesting dynamic you had going.

Kelly Cordes: Yeah, for sure. I forgot about the dropping the gear part. I think it was the second pitch of the route and I was leading. But it was actually Josh's fault cause, or so I tell it,

19:35 [End of Part C.]

[D].

00:00

but yeah, the gear sling I had on had come undone so we were always trying to shave weight and go lighter and he had done some modification to our gear sling. I'm sure that's there's some extraneous part that he'd cut off and reattached or something.

Interviewer: To save a few ounces?

Kelly Cordes: Yeah, exactly, probably a few grams. It's like probably so minimal that you are trying to shave a little bit here a little bit there, sometimes to the point of absurdity and I think Josh, at least as I remember it, forgot to double back the little loop on the gear sling. So I'm on the second pitch of the route, it's over 7,000 vertical feet from base to summit. I'm on the second pitch of the route and I feel like these things hitting my leg and I look down and it's the fricking cams, the gears sling had come undone and the cams, fortunately it was towards the end of the pitch so I already had a lot of gear in and I remember like, with one had reaching down and like catching some of the gear that was falling off. Some would bounce off into space, we lost like it wasn't that much but it was about a quarter of our cams and here it's only the second pitch of the route. I don't really remember what, because now it's like, "Wow, why didn't you go down and, we probably had some extras in base camp or whatever. But I don't know, the weather was good, we didn't know how long it was going to be good for because we didn't have a satellite phone or a forecast or anything like that. It was kind of like a magical chemistry that I think we had and that you don't always get in life. It kind of like conspires to create these incredible moments. Yeah, Josh and I were, we were fired up and eager to climb. For some reason we thought that losing a few cams wasn't going to be the show stopper for us so we kept going.

Interviewer: That was an amazing story. Are there any last stories about climbing you'd like to share?

Kelly Cordes: Naw, I don't know, there's so many memories I guess, I wouldn't know where to start or more appropriately I wouldn't know where to end. It's really formed the strongest memories of my life really. These magical moments in the mountains are things that I wouldn't trade for anything and I'm so grateful for. Especially since severely breaking my leg a few years ago I can't really access the mountains in that same way anymore, at least not to the same degree. Cause walking is sometimes hard and certainly long distances are. So it makes me appreciate what I like had all the more. I'm especially glad, like when I moved to Estes and living in the shack, living in the Chicken Coop, going climbing with all my buddies. Completely devoted my life to climbing, I'm so glad that I didn't waste any time. I'm so glad that I didn't make a ton of excuses for myself as to not go climbing. I'm glad that I didn't like get a real job. I feel like I didn't waste a whole lot of time or opportunities. I blew off any responsibility I could to go climbing as long as I could get away with it enough to not end up like completely destitute. I'm just

incredibly glad that I did because those memories and those moments are things that I wouldn't trade for anything. I mean I still try to recapture them I guess as best I can within the framework that my body allows these days. Cause they're such powerful memories, why wouldn't you want to continue to create more memories like that.

04:18

Interviewer: I suppose I have one last question, since you've been here starting out as a guide and climbing here and making a lot of friends, have you observed any changes in the climbing community over the years?

Kelly Cordes: I don't know, maybe not, I mean everything changes over time. Things evolve, things change and I have a strong dislike for the "crusty old guy thing" of talking about how the good old days were always better. A lot of times they weren't, a lot of times you are just making that up. It's really cool if you have these memories that meant something to you, but those memories still exist, they don't have to come at the, there's not a cost involved by way of progress or by way of more people getting involved in climbing. Or the advent of climbing gyms or the popularization of bouldering and sport climbing. Those are all wonderful things and those are all some changes that have happened a lot in the recent decade or so. Like Rocky Mountain National Park is more known for being an overall class bouldering destination now that it is for things like the Diamond and stuff. Which I admit to me that seems a little weird, you know I'm like, "Why." But I mean whatever, it's great. I mean like people are really really having an incredible time going bouldering on phenomenal bouldering in Rocky Mountain National Park. That's wonderful, that doesn't harm my ability to go climb the Diamond, it's great.

Interviewer: I suppose the rise in popularity of climbing has broadened your audience for your writing and for your product reviews.

Kelly Cordes: Yeah, yeah for sure. The various things that I write about, whether they're product copy for companies like Patagonia, I mean their business is doing better as more climbers are involved. For the creative writing work that I do, the popularization of climbing. On a purely selfish level, yeah it's helped me for sure. I don't see any reason to be crusty about it. Like change happens and it's wise to embrace it and also try to shape it and avoid any sort of negative shifts within that. How in the world can you take something that you love and say that only you and your friends should be the ones who are allowed to have it? It's such a bullshit attitude and it's one that kind of in a de facto sense sometimes gets expressed by bitter old climbers sitting on their bar stool. I'm determined not to become one of them.

Interviewer: Well thanks so much for sharing your stories Kelly.

Kelly Cordes: For sure, it's a pleasure, thank you.

07:30 [End of Part D. End of Interview.]

cordes_kelly_20140218.doc

ABSTRACT - International alpine climber and writer/author Kelly Cordes shares his overwhelming passion and devotion to climbing. After serving as a guide for CMS, Kelly transitioned into freelance writing, was a Senior Editor for the American Alpine Journal and has just completed his first book which is centered on Cerro Torre Peak in Patagonia. Kelly has the distinguished position of serving as an Ambassador for the Patagonia gear company which involves the development and testing of climbing related products.

Alpine climbing in Alaska, Patagonia and Pakistan is highlighted in the interview. Kelly describes what he calls “the chase” which is his quest to find and climb rarely forming ice formations in RMNP. The first ascent of an ephemeral ice route called “Crazy Train” with climbing partner Topher Donahue is highlighted. He also details training activities called linkups which he uses as a training exercise in preparation for major climbs such as the 7,000’ vertical face of Trango Tower in Pakistan. Linkups involve quickly doing a series of climbs including perhaps as many as 40 different pitches in an area such as the major routes on Lumpy Ridge. Kelly describes one 23 hour linkup training experience in RMNP which covered 25 horizontal miles with countless thousands of feet of vertical technical climbing. This interview is a special look into a climbers love and appreciation for the mountains and climbs in the Estes Park area.

cordes_kelly_20140218.doc

KELLY CORDES INTERVIEW INDEX

American Alpine Journal	3, 4
Armstrong, Brent	13
Beckwith, Christian	3
Bicknell, John	1
Caldwell, Tommy	5, 10
Cerro Torre Peak, Patagonia	4
Colorado Mountain School	1
Copp, Johnny	13
Crazy Train Route	8, 9, 10
Daley, Malcom	8
DeCapio, Scotty	10
Donahue, Topher	8, 9, 10
Ferguson, Duncan	8

Great Trango Tower Pakistan	14, 15, 16
Linkups	11, 12, 13, 14
Lowe, Jeff	8
Patagonia gear company	4, 5, 6
The Chase	6, 7, 8, 9, 10
Wharton, Josh	5, 14, 15, 16